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## FROM THE CLUB STAGE TO THE NATIONAL SCENE: HOW MASS MEDIA INTERPRETED TWO COMEDIANS AS IMPORTANT IMMIGRANT VOICES

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*This article investigates how comedians with an immigrant background gain political relevance, taking two contemporary comedians from Norway and Sweden as cases. The study uses media's interpretive power as a way to explore Habermas' (2006) claim that the borders between the cultural and the political public spheres are porous. A reading of the press coverage of the comedians is used to discover patterns in how media interpreted the comedians as immigrant voices and as humourists. It is demonstrated how the comedians get moulded into certain positions through mass media interpretations, as well as explained where these interpretations come from historically. Furthermore, it is shown that the coverage of the two comedians to a large degree conformed to existing immigration discourse, challenging the view of comedy as a subversive force.*

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural public sphere; comedy; immigrant voices; media interpretation; political humour

### Introduction

In the end of November 1999, a Norwegian stand-up comedian made it to the news. Her name was Shabana Rehman, and she was presented as the country's first female comedian with an immigrant background. Some months later, across the border to Sweden, comedian Özz Nûjen got media attention as an actor in a radio theatre piece about immigrant youth. In a very short time, these two comedians gained stable positions in the public sphere, Rehman as editor for a website published by one of the largest Norwegian newspapers, Nûjen as show host in a popular talk show on Swedish radio. This was not given to them only by virtue of being comedians: They were established as important immigrant voices in the political public sphere. Their positions grew stronger in the years to come, and they still enjoy them today.

Although the two comedians gained similarly important status, their positions are qualitatively different. Rehman took up a stance where she provided 'criticism from within' of the Norwegian-Pakistani milieu, visible through her media and NGO-engagement against social control in immigrant milieus; while Nûjen was positioned as a critical minority view on the multicultural society, frequently used as a sort of expert voice on multiculturalism and marginalisation in the media. This was not merely caused by the direction of the butt in their comedy, or by their own agency. Although all comedy has a butt, what this butt is about is often ambiguous and calls for interpretation if it is to be understood as political (Gilbert 2004). In addition, the majority of the public did not watch the shows performed by Rehman and Nûjen. They gained their knowledge about them through media coverage.

A major finding of this study is that the media presented remarkably consistent interpretations of the two comedians from the very beginning, interpretations that presented the comedians as politically relevant. Hence, this paper seeks to show how the media coverage moulded certain positions in the public sphere for the two comedians through their interpretive power. Through disseminating certain sets of interpretations, media presented the comedians as certain types of humourists and as specific types of immigrant voices. This in turn influenced how different parts of the public interacted with these voices – from what ordinary citizens wrote in letters to the editor, to what kind of cases the press itself would use the comedians as source for, to what kind of public committee the comedians got asked to participate in. To put it short, medias interpretive power matters when it comes to how comedy, or culture and the arts in general, can have a political function.

The political functions of the comedians are understood through public sphere theory, where the arts and culture have a clear place in what Habermas (1989) originally terms the *literary public sphere*, and which more appropriately should be called *the cultural public sphere* today (Gripsrud 2008). An important question in this regard is how content and actors from the cultural public sphere play a role in the political public sphere. Habermas (1996) has stated that the borders between the cultural and the political public sphere are porous, but how this actually functions is an empirical question. A contribution of this paper will thus be to shed light on one possible mechanism at play here, namely the interpretive power of legacy media, by understanding how media interpret cultural actors as politically relevant and where these interpretations come from. An important element will also be to assess how the interpretations are *used* to understand politicised phenomena, in line with Gripsrud (2017) who argues that argumentation is one of the possible political functions of the cultural public sphere. In addition, the political role of comedy has been a question of interest in humour and comedy studies (Holm 2017) as well as in political communications studies (Delli Carpini 2017, Young 2017). By using public sphere theory, this study presents a little used perspective on the relationship between comedy and politics.

The main research question of this paper is thus *How did the media interpretation of Rehman and Nûjen shape their trajectories from the cultural to the political public sphere, and how can these interpretations be explained historically?* The paper is formed as a historical study of the media coverage of Rehman and Nûjen's first years in the public sphere, structured as follows. First, I will present the theoretical and methodical perspectives. Then, I will analyse the media coverage of Rehman and Nûjen to demonstrate how their role as immigrant comedians were differently interpreted in the two countries. Following, I will indicate some explanations for these different interpretations. Finally, I will discuss the implications of my findings for public sphere theory and the political function of humour in the conclusion.

### **Theoretical and Methodical Perspectives**

How the public sphere works in modern media societies is a major topic Habermas' later work, first and foremost in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996). An important point in this work is that the public sphere actually is composed of numerous public spheres, but that their borders are porous. The audience gathered to watch the stand-up performances of Nûjen and Rehman constitutes what Habermas calls an *occasional* public, while the press reporting on them addresses the *abstract* public spheres of readers and listeners in Sweden and Norway. These different public spheres are governed by exclusionary mechanisms, but hermeneutical bridges can be built between them. Media coverage of cultural events is one example of such bridges: They make what happens in the occasional, small publics where people are gathered for a cultural event like stand-up, visible in the national, abstract public sphere. Simultaneously, the media coverage of cultural events is essential in interpreting these events as politically relevant (Knapskog and Larsen, 2008). Analysing this interpretive process is crucial in order to understand the porous borders of the public spheres, as well as the media's power in this respect. According to Habermas (2006) later model of the public sphere in modern media societies, the media coverage of the comedians should be understood as *published opinions*, which eventually can influence public opinion both through generating others published opinions, but also through forming the attitudes and beliefs that the public realises through voting, as well as directly influencing governance. In this model, media interpretations are given real political power, since they can be used to translate cultural expressions into argumentation about politicised issues (see Gripsrud 2017).

In order to research this, I use the analytical concept of *interpretive repertoires*: consistent patterns of speech used to construct interpretations of the world (Potter & Wetherell 1987). 'Consistent' should in this case not be understood as stagnant or inflexible, but as recurring through different instances of speech. It refers to cultural patterns of making sense of the world. Interpretive repertoires are flexible and can be combined and restructured in different contexts and by different actors. They are also not only discursive phenomena but legitimise decisions and actions in the

material world (Costera Meijer 2001). In the present study, this specific type of analysis can demonstrate routine deployments of cultural understandings in journalistic practices, and thus reveal its practical consequences in terms of possibilities and constraints for audience participation in the public sphere, and for further journalism.

The analytical tool of interpretive repertoires will be used inductively on the material, which consists of press coverage of Nûjen and Rehman from their first appearances until the end of 2002, after which both of them had gained stable positions in their respective national public spheres. The two comedians are chosen as cases since they appeared roughly simultaneously in two very similar countries. Comparing the same kind of event in Norway and Sweden, two socially and politically similar countries, allows for pointing out fine-grained historical differences that can explain why certain media interpretations come about rather than others. Thus, it yields a richer empirical understanding of the national public spheres and a richer theoretical understanding of how the porous borders between the cultural and the political public sphere work.

The data was collected through name search in the database Retriever, which quite extensively, if not completely, cover the press material in the two countries in the period. In addition, I have included the two first TV-appearances by Rehman as well as Nûjen's appearances in radio talk shows in the period. While I ideally would have used material covering all their appearances, access to audio-visual material is more complicated than access to press material in Scandinavia. Nevertheless, database searches have showed that the press coverage of the two comedians was much more extensive than the audio-visual coverage, so the data gives a solid material for analysing their presence in the national public spheres. In addition, I have used the representative dataset consisting of press material on immigration in Scandinavia from 1970-2015 collected for SCANPUB (Hovden and Mjelde, this issue) as background data. The rationale behind this is to understand not only how the press used different repertoires to understand the comedians, but also if and how these repertoires relate to other cases where immigration was covered. In addition to making use of the existing statistical analysis, I have conducted a qualitative reading of the material dating from 1997, as it is relevant to understand how different repertoires were used and established in the years leading up to Rehman and Nûjen's debuts. 1997 is chosen because this was one year after the end of the Bosnia war and the consecutive refugee influx to Scandinavia, an event shown to influence the immigration discourse in the two countries (Hovden and Mjelde, this issue). In the same vein, starting in 1997 allows me to include material covering general elections in both countries. It thus seems like a good point in order to get a rich and representative picture of the immigration discourse at the time.

All individual posts of the material have been analysed through close reading in order to find repeating ways of presenting, understanding, explaining and interpreting the two comedians, and the patterns have inductively been classified into different interpretive repertoires and constellation between distinct repertoires. In addition to the primary data material, I have made use of especially comedy and humour theory, but also other theoretical sources on culture, to make my classification. The rationale behind this is that interpretive repertoires are best understood as deeply cultural, not only situational, and should therefore be related to existing knowledge of the culture they operate within. This is also the reason for analytically separating some repertoires that almost always go together in the data material, e.g. the fool and the vamp-repertoires used about Rehman, since I see them as stemming from different cultural ideas that not always have been used together in other historical contexts.

### **Media Trajectories and Repertoires of Shabana Rehman and Özz Nûjen.**

Rehman's entry into the Norwegian public sphere was through an episode of the journalism magazine *Rikets Tilstand* ("The state of the Kingdom"), broadcasted by the commercial public service channel TV2 the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 1999. The magazine was launched that fall but had at this time gained a strong position in the public sphere, by a couple of episodes highlighting forced marriages and social control of women in the Norwegian-Pakistani milieu. Rehman was presented

as the first female stand-up comedian with an immigrant background. However, Rehman was far from an established comedian at the time: The routine showed on television was part of an open mic before the main routine, and according to Løvland (2002), this was only Rehman's third appearance on open mic.

The appearance led to a huge media interest in Rehman, first in the form of multiple portrait interviews as well as participation in a talk show on the non-commercial public broadcaster NRK, just few days after the episode of *Rikets Tilstand*. Throughout year 2000, she was often used as a source by the media in matters of integration and immigrant life, as well as being both the writer and the topic of multiple columns, op-eds and letters to the editor. Eventually, she gained a more permanent presence in the public sphere the 17<sup>th</sup> of November 2000, when the newspaper *Dagbladet* launched the website *fundamental.net* with Rehman as editor.

The two main repertoires used in media stories about Rehman are what I call *the taboo-poking fool* and the *life-affirming vamp*. The first, which I will call the *fool* in the following, concerns how she as a comedian confronts social prejudice and taboos, and is deeply embedded in cultural ideas about comedy, more specifically the notion of the comedian as a sage fool who dares to speak truth to power (Bevis 2013, Erasmus 2014 [1668], Gilbert 2004). The second, the *vamp*, concerns how she embraces her own female sexuality, in a confronting, in-your-face way. This interpretive repertoire seems to be more connected with certain ideas about femininity, but there are links to the genre-conventions of stand-up comedy, in which topics often are of a sexual nature and the routine is based on constructing an autobiographical persona (Løvland 2002, Gilbert 2004), and of course to even more ancient ideas of comedy being connected to reproduction and the life forces (Bevis 2013).

These two repertoires were made into a constellation already in the very first press interview with Rehman:

*A figure with the entire body, head and face covered in a black veil stands in the spotlight in the packed club Onkel Blaa in Bærum. Then, she throws the veil. Like a toreador with a red cloth she stands there, challenging and seductive in a red, tight dress. Shabana Rehman (23) takes the bull by the horns; meets prejudice amongst white and dark-skinned Norwegians by humour and irony. (Aftenposten, November 26, 1999)*

In this excerpt, her sexuality itself is challenging in an assertive way: she throws away the veil; she demands to be seen as a sexual being. While not explicitly stated, this setup connects with the last sentences, where she is understood as someone who comically challenges prejudice. Her character as a vamp becomes instrumental for her role as a fool.

As sexuality is understood as the truth about the self (Foucault 1984), the vamp-repertoire is not only about a confronting kind of sexuality, but also about authentic being. In the same interview, Rehman herself states that "I want to be myself, not the one others want me to be", as well as "I show the woman behind the veil – my passion and my zest for life". This is in turn important for how the fool-repertoire is used. In the press coverage, Rehman is interpreted as a fool in both the historical senses of the word: As someone who challenges the tenability of our social knowledge, and as someone who speaks truth to power. This is based on how her humour is frequently understood as challenging prejudice and bigotry. More specifically, she is understood as a counter-example to the idea that the family owns the sexuality of Pakistani women, an idea existing amongst both Norwegians and the Pakistani minority, according to her:

*- I use the veil as a gimmick to start a dialogue. I want to show the woman behind the veil. Her sexuality – and vulnerability. When I enter, Norwegians think: She is oppressed, poor thing. Pakistanis think: Wow, she is on stage, but has preserved her decency. Then I surprise both when the veil falls. (Dagbladet, January 15, 2000)*

This excerpt illustrates how the social function of the fool is understood in the coverage of Rehman: Confronting the audiences with the truth through humour. She first appears on stage veiled, apparently confirming the audiences' prejudices, but then surprises everyone by showing her true self: dressed in red. This surprise is indeed staged as a comical one, but this humoristic device is also what confronts the audience with the falsity of their prejudice: Rehman is neither oppressed nor decent. Furthermore, the truth Rehman speaks is connected to how her sexuality is a key to her authentic being: when she unveils and thus shows herself, she appears as sexy and confronting.

This particular combination of repertoires is the most widespread way to understand Rehman as a comedian and public voice throughout my material. However, it should be understood in relation to repertoires used about the Pakistani minority, through which the coverage of Rehman gains a certain political flavour: She is someone who stands up against oppression in the Pakistani milieu. The role of the fool is namely not only speaking the truth, but also speaking the truth to power, and power is in the press coverage embodied in "conservative immigrant men with long beards"

*It is not the human inside (sic) the veil it is something wrong with, but the view of human nature that forces her to feel safer if only she wraps in her femininity and femaleness. A woman without a face, but not without opinions. Suddenly she stands on a Norwegian stand-up stage. Draped in black to protect herself against unclean glances. But the veil is demonstratively thrown away. Behold: A Norwegian-Pakistani girl who bravely confronts requirements of honour and other requirements that constrains women both in East and West. (VG, November 28, 1999)*

It is this configuration of interpretations that make Rehman a critique from within: the main target of her jokes becomes the culture and the power figures in the Norwegian-Pakistani minority. Through performing her own marginality as a minority woman on the comedy stage, she takes control over her own story and even her own sexuality and gains power (Gilbert 2004). This understanding is supported by two minor repertoires, on how she takes a personal risk and on how her being a female Pakistani comedian is something new that will bring about social change. These two repertoires cannot be fully understood without the adjacent repertoire of Pakistani (and Muslim) culture as oppressive to women. This is also what gives the vamp-repertoire its political force: By suppressing women's sexuality, conservative Pakistani culture oppresses human authenticity and even life force itself.

It was as a voice propounding this particular kind of critique from within that Rehman gained her position in the political public sphere. The configuration of repertoires presented above is what she tended to use in her own early op-eds, written alone or together with Hege Storhaug (e.g. *VG*, April 4, 2000); what journalists used to present her with when she was used as a source in articles about integration – the long quote above is from a long reportage about the use of veils amongst Muslim women; as well as what is responded to in different columns and letters to the editor, where she for example is praised for "practically fighting alone against the hypocrisy in the male-dominated Islamic culture" (*Dagbladet*, April 12, 2000). She was also interpreted as breaking taboos, for example by primus motor of the Norwegian stand-up scene at the time, Jånni Kristiansen: "It is liberating when a Norwegian-Pakistani says what Norwegians think, but what we don't dare to say aloud" (*Aftenposten*, November 26, 1999). While it is not entirely clear what Kristiansen refers to as "what Norwegians think", it makes sense to interpret it as matters regarding the so-called "honour culture" of the Pakistani minority, and thus that Rehman's social value laid in how she brought up this taboo.

However, Kristiansen was wrong in that Norwegians did not talk about this matter. I have found articles on forced marriages in the milieu from 1997, two years before Rehman picked up the microphone. Also, the issue was high up on the agenda that fall due to the investigative journalism of *Rikets Tilstand* and was already politicised through a government action plan. Rehman's comedy did not break any taboos in this regard. Rather, her appearance and public success seems to confirm

the *barometer hypothesis of humour*, that humour reflect society as a whole, especially important social contradictions (Kuipers 2015). Norwegians already talked about, and where preoccupied by, forced marriages and other elements of women's oppression in Muslim milieus in Norway, a country taking pride in its gender equality.

What they to a lesser degree talked about, however, was the other kind of prejudice Rehman criticised: Norwegian's generalisations about immigrants. As the quotes above show, it is often mentioned that Rehman's routine addresses prejudice amongst the Norwegian majority as well. However, this is rarely expanded upon in the media coverage. The only exception is a long portrait-interview:

*Dagbladet: You confuse on stage. I sit there and wonder: Are you kidding with my prejudices about you? Your own prejudice? Or reality?*

*Shabana: So good that you feel it that way. That confusion the audience feels, I grew up with that. It has been like this all my life. You start secondary school and get boy-crazy and see your girlfriends write down the names of everyone they kissed in their Garfield diaries, right? And you can tell that the Norwegian boys see you as a bit mystical. One does not fall in love with the Pakistani girls (...) Second and third generation immigrant youth are on their way to become losers. When parents and society don't recognise them as the Norwegians they actually are, they backstab the youth. They are forced to be one thing, Norwegians that is, or the other, Pakistani. They are not seen. (Dagbladet, January 15, 2000)*

In this excerpt, a different repertoire is used, of *the comedian as a narrator of a certain kind of identity-related experience*. It is connected with the idea of the comedian as a truth-teller but also based on the genre-conventions of stand-up as autobiographical, based on everyday observations. At the same time, Rehman connects this repertoire about herself to a repertoire about immigrant youth: that of *marginalisation*. Immigrant youth are marginalised by their Norwegian peers, by their parents, and by society at large. This constellation of repertoires is as valid an interpretation of Rehman's routine as the critique from within-constellation, but is never embellished in the media coverage – with the exception from the quoted portrait and her first talk-show interview. It is also never used – no commenter or letter to the editor writes about how Rehman addresses marginalisation of immigrants by Norwegians, and she is never used as a source in articles about this matter.

Quite the opposite was the case for Özz Nûjen. Trained as an actor, he gained national media attention as actor and co-writer of various comical theatre projects on immigrant youth. The media coverage escalated in May 2002, when he made the stand-up performance *Den tjocka kurdiska kvinnan säger vad hon vill* (*The fat Kurdish woman says what she wants*), thoroughly paraphrased in *Svenska Dagbladet*:

*A heavy-set Kurdish woman serves tea and cookies. But she uses her own language, talking about a cup of cay, which she threateningly serves while she hoists her broad breast and wiggles her butt. She is Fatima, the woman who says what she wants.*

*(...)*

*She has been living in Sweden for 25 years, but lots of things are still impossible to understand. Like that she remains an immigrant. Even her children who are born in Sweden are called immigrants. She thinks it sounds like a profession, like baker or carpenter. Should they not be immigrated soon? She is tired of immigrating and immigrating day in and day out, she wants to arrive now! (the Swedish original, "komma fram" is ambiguous and can be read as both "arrive" and "appear"). (Svenska Dagbladet, May 12, 2002)*

While the *fool*-repertoire is used at times in the material and by Nûjen himself, being acknowledged as primarily a comedian from the very beginning, the comic aspects of his work are paid little attention to in the press coverage. Rather, the dominant repertoire, clearly visible in the quote above, is what I call *the comedian as a narrator of a certain identity-related experience*. Nûjen's monologues are taken to reveal the immigrant experience as marginalised in Swedish society. That this experience is made public is furthermore seen as valuable, and often connected to a repertoire about language: Mixing Swedish with immigrant languages creates a new form of language which not only is represented on stage but constitutes the conveyed experience together with the energetic rhythm of Nûjen's performance.

These two repertoires have a connection to stand-up comedy as a genre, where the observational style and the autobiographical personae of the comedian are central features (Gilbert 2004), but they also seem to stem from different versions of the *expression theory of art*. This is a family of aesthetic theories where art is seen as expressing the artist's lived experience, with a special emphasis on his feelings and emotions (Khatchadourian 1965). Art's power to convey a special kind of truth, connected to its form, is also an important theoretical point (Croce 1921). Both these aspects are visible in the media repertoire on Nûjen: Through conveying his own experience, he reveals something true, and moves the viewer emotionally. This becomes important since the repertoires also in this case are linked to repertoires about the situation for immigrants in Sweden. The contrast to the coverage of Rehman is obvious: Marginalisation from the Swedish society at large is posed as the main societal issue in this interpretation, not cultural problems in the minority. Nûjen also explicitly connects his own experience with structural racism:

*[Interviewer]: You think that you have been discriminated?*

*[Nûjen] -Yes, terribly. In everyday life. When I applied for work and when I tried to get into clubs. One has stopped me even if I had the right age and the right money. So, one deprives certain people the freedom to have as fun as others. (...) He [Nûjen] knows where ignorance lives and where prejudice flourishes – far into what he calls “proper city hall racism”. (Svenska Dagbladet, May 12, 2002)*

Nûjen's routines are seen as stories about marginalisation of immigrants, and their experiential basis render them true and powerful stories of Swedish society. However, the truth of the strong, independent Kurdish women is challenged in the same article:

*So, the image of the oppressed Kurdish women and girls dominated by the family's men – that isn't true?*

*Özz Nûjen twists himself. It certainly exists an oppression that he thinks is “bloody awful”, whether it targets Kurdish or Swedish Women*

*(...)*

*[Nûjen]: - So many other things have been added to the notion 'honour'. Elements that do not belong there. So then, the gap between the Swedish and the Turkish culture increases, the foreign becomes even more frightening*

*[Interviewer]: How do you yourself define honour?*

*[Nûjen]: -That you stand up for yourself, for who you are. Then you are an honourable and respectable person.*

*[Interviewer]: But how do you then explain that women like Pela and Fadime were murdered in the name of male honour?*

*(...)*

*[Nûjen]: - I do not say that the oppressed Kurdish woman does not exist. But she has not existed in my life. I have barely seen her. (Svenska Dagbladet, May 12, 2002)*

Two elements of this excerpt are interesting. Firstly, it demonstrates the agency of the comedian himself – how he wants to be interpreted, and how the typical media interpretation seems

to be similar to what he encoded in the show himself. Secondly, it draws attention to the status of personal experience in relation to truth: It is impossible to argue against personal experience – it tells the person's own truth. In Nûjen's case, this truth seems to have been accepted at face value.

The coverage of Nûjen was mainly in the cultural section of the newspapers. His trajectory to the political public sphere is therefore less clear-cut than Rehman, who appeared in an investigative journalism magazine and got covered by different sections of the newsroom, from cultural journalists to news journalists specialised in immigration. He is also a less politicised figure than Rehman. However, Nûjen gained a nevertheless politically relevant position in the public spheres, namely as a sort of artist intellectual specialised on multicultural society as well as an officially sanctioned stand-up comedian. Following Riegert and Roosvall (2017), cultural journalism in Sweden and the Nordics in general should be seen as encompassing not only journalism about the arts, but also feature and lifestyle journalism and a certain kind of commentary and debate on societal issues. After his first solo performances in 2001, Nûjen became a regular contributor to the short-lived magazine *Mangas*, about multicultural Sweden, which was a part of the *Studio Ett*, a large news-oriented talk show on public radio channel SR 1. Next year, he was one of the "summer hosts" in SR 1's popular summer programming. The constellation of the marginalisation and the experience-repertoire was frequently used in these programs as well as in the presentation of them:

*Özz Nûjen's summer program will be about resistance. The resistance I had to grow up with, the resistance I met, the resistance I have seen, the resistance that gives hope and despair. (Nummer, June 26, 2002)*

(...)

*Why do immigrants need to learn Swedish before they get a job, if it is at the workplace they have an opportunity to learn the language? Is it time to accept Rinkeby Swedish as a natural development of the Swedish language? Conversation about the tolerance towards people who speak with an accent and how much accent one can speak with in order to be understood. (Mangas metadata, June 30, 2001)*

The constellation between the experience and marginalisation-repertoires clearly had a continued life in the more analytic programs where Nûjen participated. Furthermore, Nûjen got a strong position as comedian in SVT. In 2004, he and his colleague Shan Atci became hosts and makers of the public service broadcaster SVT's new stand-up program, *Stockholm Live*. This was only the second regular stand-up programming on SVT, based on shows in the new comedy club Nûjen and Atci had started as a breakout from the established scene at Norra Brunn and Berns Salonger. Nûjen's full feature shows have also always been showed at SVT.

Being fairly new to the comedy scene and the Swedish cultural public sphere, Nûjen gained an exceptionally strong position within the cultural sections of SR and SVT, both regarding greencards to talkshows and debate as well as the opportunity to show his comedy. The constellation of interpretive repertoires understanding Nûjen as someone who presented a new kind of experience, which revitalised comedy and Swedish stage art as well as having social value, seem to serve as the main legitimisation for this position.

### **Where the Interpretations Come From.**

As shown above, Rehman and Nûjen gained qualitatively very different positions in the public sphere. Rehman was understood as voicing a critique from within, and became an explicitly political figure through community work, engagement in public committees and later leader of NGOs. Nûjen was understood as criticising Swedish society at large from its margins, and remained a cultural figure, although with an affinity for analysis and debate on societal issues. These two positions were largely results of the different interpretative repertoires used in the media coverage



about them during their trajectory from small club stages to permanent positions in the national public spheres.

It remains to explain why just these different interpretive repertoires were used in two relatively similar contexts. Three dimensions appear important. The first dimension concerns the comedians' acts and how they frame themselves in interviews and other public appearances. It is clear that Rehman's act can be interpreted as a critique of Pakistani patriarchist honour culture, and she often voices this critique explicitly in serious genres as well as in comedy form. However, her act has another dimension as well, namely criticising prejudice and marginalisation towards immigrant youth from the Norwegian majority. This is especially clear looking at how her comedy routine is reported in the material. As the quotes about show, focus is on how she throws away the veil in the opening. However, it is never mentioned that this physical act is anchored by the phrase "my name is Shabana, and I want to tell you a bit about what it is like to be me". This is possible to read as an interpretative cue directing the butt of the joke towards Norwegian's prejudices: that Muslim girls always are the same: veiled, and that there is no individuality or sensuality behind the veil. The rest of the short routine is also filled with jokes about Norwegian men being afraid of her family's reaction if they engage romantically or sexually with the Shabana-personae. While this certainly can be interpreted as a joke about her own difficult situation, the target can also be Norwegian men's prejudices on the romantic market, their assumption that every Pakistani girl is subject to strict social control. The butt of the joke can thus not be the only explanation, since it is ambiguous what the butt is.

Nûjen's acts are more clearly about the marginalisation of immigrants, and he virtually never speaks about cultural problems within immigrant communities. However, there are references to this in his work, for example in the *Fat Kurdish Woman*: "I deny carrying my husband's honour between my legs. If it really is located there, I pee with it 15 times a day". As with Rehman, it is of course ambiguous if the butt of these jokes is honour culture, or prejudices about it. The point is that this ambiguity existed, thus, other interpretations than the one dominating in the media coverage were possible. Hence, parts of the media interpretation obviously come from other sources than the comedy text alone.

The second dimension is which editorial milieus that first picked up on Rehman and Nûjen, and what they were preoccupied with. Rehman was first introduced to the public sphere through an episode of *Rikets Tilstand*. In addition to being established as a program critical towards Pakistani honour culture, which can have influenced the audience's expectation horizon when watching Rehman, the episode in question introduced her as a contrast to a story on honour killings and forced marriage in the Pakistani milieu, and as a symbol for a "growing rebellion" amongst Norwegian-Pakistani women. During the sequence, parts of her comedy routine were relayed with biographical interviews discussing social control and violence in her home, as well as reportages from Pakistan on forced marriage. Thus, her comedy routine was presented to the larger public sphere together with a certain interpretation: that of Rehman presenting a brave critique from within against life-oppressing and violent conservative forces. The following coverage picked this up, treating her debut as hard news, seen in relation to stories about Norwegian-Pakistani women being forced into marriage or victims of honour-related violence, themes that were gaining increased attention at the time (see Hovden and Mjelde, this issue). To view her as a critique from within, through the constellation of fool-vamp repertoires, stuck with her and resonated in the public sphere, because of how they were strongly linked to existing news agendas that were very present in the public.

Nûjen, on the other hand, entered the national public sphere through art journalism and criticism. While he less clearly entered an existing news agenda, Swedish cultural journalists have a tradition for reflecting "the cultural and political debates of the contemporary era" (Riegert & Roosvall 2017: 106). Hovden and Mjelde's (this issue) results indicate that marginalisation of immigrants was indeed high on the Swedish agenda, and this was especially the case in cultural journalism (Riegert and Hovden, this issue). An understanding of Nûjen's comedy as presenting identity-related experience with marginalisation and racism was a good fit with these trends in

journalistic culture, as well as the use of interpretive repertoires informed by expression theories of art. In line with this, there was already a high interest for artworks narrating immigrant experiences at the time: Nûjen was preceded by the television serial *Nya Landet* (the New Country) and the movie *Jalla! Jalla* by director Josef Fares. The interest in the experience of marginalisation was well established among Swedish cultural journalists. Thus, both existing news agendas as well as different journalistic cultures are parts of the explanation of the interpretive repertoires about the two comedians, and the earliest interpretations almost seem to create a sort of path-dependence for the later coverage.

However, this does not explain why both Rehman and Nûjen were cemented into established positions while both their routines as well as events in the two countries could have served as starting points for different positions. This became especially pertinent after two brutal killings in the two respective countries, the 2001 racist blind violence Benjamin murder in Norway and the 2002 honour-related Fadime murder in Sweden. As quoted above, Nûjen was challenged by a journalist on women's role in Kurdish culture, and Rehman, who grew up in the same neighbourhood as the victim in the Benjamin killing, took part in public demonstrations against the killing and against racism. However, this was not taken as an opportunity to embellish the thoughts on racism and marginalisation that Rehman had presented in some early interviews. Likewise, Nûjen was not further challenged on his optimistic representation of the Kurdish woman.

Hence, the third explanatory dimension of how the repertoires about Rehman and Nûjen came into being is the non-existence of the idea of structural racism in the Norwegian public sphere, contrasted to its pervasiveness in the Swedish public sphere. While it is hard to establish what counts as a taboo in any historical context, there is some indicative evidence that interpretive repertoires about racism were restricted to cases of racist violence at this time in Norway. Hovden and Mjelde (this issue) show that racism as a topic, as well as the frame 'immigrants as victims of racism', were rare in the Norwegian press coverage of the immigration issue. My own qualitative readings of the same material have shown that the idea of private persons (everyday racism) or public bodies (structural racism) systematically discriminating immigrants was a rare, if not even obscure, standpoint in the Norwegian public sphere at the time. From a rhetorical perspective, the existence of structural racism was not a *topos*, a commonplace from where it is possible to develop arguments or interpretations (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969), in Norway at this time.

The opposite was the case in Sweden. Hovden and Mjelde (this issue) show that racism as a topic and the racism-subtype of the victim frame were widespread in Swedish press, and qualitative readings of the same material supports and understanding of structural as a *topos* in Sweden at the time. It is used in all kinds of genres, about a wide variety of issues, and used by all kind of actors from politicians to journalists to ordinary citizens writing letters to the editor. It is also clear that the *topos* entails an understanding of racism permutating Swedish society: It is used to understand xenophobia in general as the cause for racist violence, to interpret government policy as discriminating, as well as an understanding of 'everyday racism' as common in acts and attitudes of the majority population.

The difference between the two countries is especially striking looking at the coverage of the violent episodes mentioned above. While racist violence in Sweden often is connected with structural racism, this happened to a very little degree in Norway after the Benjamin killing. In the same vain, structural racism and marginalisation was used as one of multiple explanations when discussing the Fadime killings in Sweden (*Sveriges Radio*, April 27, 2008), as well as used as a point in the metadecade on how to take caution when addressing the issue of honour killings (*Aftonbladet*, January 22, 2002) – but never used in the debate on similar incidents in Norway. Structural racism was a part of *doxa*, a wider set of already accepted premises and shared commonplaces (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969) in the Swedish public sphere – but negated in the Norwegian *doxa*. *Doxa* should not be understood in a strong Bordieuan sense in this case, determining what is possible to talk about or even render as intelligible. Rather, it should be seen as a clear prerequisite for what kind of interpretations that have status as common sense, and thus becomes possible to rhetorically work with in the public sphere.

The doxa on racism seems like the strongest explanation of how the two comedians were interpreted. Nûjen's accounts of being discriminated and marginalised were already acknowledged as a societal diagnosis in the Swedish public sphere. While being praised for his originality and social value, it can hardly be said that he brought about a change of perspective in the Swedish immigration debate. On the other side of the border, Rehman's repertoires about Norwegian's prejudices and marginalisation did not catch on as a topic in the public sphere. This is in line with, and a possible explanation to, empirical research indicating that comedy does not bring about change in public opinion (Young 2017). It is hard for comedy to go against the doxa and the media agenda of the day in order to be valued and even understood amongst a broader public, as it is ambiguous and require to be grasped immediately in order to be successful. This does not mean that the doxa forced the two comedians into certain positions, but rather that the parts of their comedy that were not aligned with commonplace thinking did not catch on as a source for arguments in the media. Hence, the coverage reinforced existing interpretive repertoires rather than introducing new perspectives. Even if their humour obviously touched upon social contradictions or boundaries, they certainly did not break any taboos regarding what issues could be talked about, or how it should be talked about. The borders between the cultural and the political public sphere were in these cases only porous for the kind of arguments that already were solidly established, or hegemonic if one wish. Thus, both Rehman and Nûjen became the comedian the press wanted, rather than the fool who shows the uncomfortable truth.

## Conclusion

Rehman and Nûjen's trajectories illustrate some important aspects of how media's interpretive power functions in regulating the porous border between the cultural and the political public sphere. The cultural text, and the comedian's own explicit interpretations of this, certainly plays a role, but this needs to be aligned with the current media agenda and the journalistic cultures. Besides the current agenda, doxa regarding how to understand certain issues seems an even stronger mechanism. Comedy pushing boundaries are interesting for newsrooms and cultural journalists alike, but only if it pushes a boundary they already are interested in, and the comedians do not manage to challenge how to understand this boundary through their comedy. The early interpretations of comedians also seem to stick with them through their career as well as moulding a position for them in the political public sphere. This is a blow to the long-lived idea that comedy is subversive. Rehman and Nûjen's comedy did not break any taboos in the national public spheres, nor did they challenge public opinion by introducing any new perspective in the media.

However, the public sphere is more than the mass media, and the cultural public sphere have other functions than presenting argumentation for different political points of view. Gripsrud (2017) argues that the cultural public sphere also has important political functions through contributing to identity building as well as generating empathy for different human experiences. There are some indications that Nûjen and Rehman contributed to this kind of identity building. Rehman certainly broke a taboo in the Norwegian-Pakistani milieu by being a woman joking about sex on a public stage, thus possibly giving voice to an experience and a social group that earlier had little access to the public sphere. Furthermore, through being covered extensively by the mass media, she has become some sort of front figure in various initiatives for and by minority women, addressing problematic issues in immigrant communities while refraining from adopting the antagonising rhetoric and policy of the far right. It could be argued that her comedy routine paved the ground for a *subaltern counterpublic* (Fraser 1992) of minority women, and also an opportunity for this counterpublic to get access to the larger public sphere. Nûjen is a less politicised figure, but he has nevertheless been an important part in establishing scenes where immigrant comedians perform, as well as being one of the most popular stand-up comedians on national Swedish television – which again can be a resource for identity building and empathy. There seems to be an interesting question of how popular comedy is an opportunity for *access*, which calls for more research into the politics of comedy in the public sphere.

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